

## **Closing the Circle**

**Dilip Simeon**

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*I look at the world and I notice it's turning / While my guitar gently weeps  
With every mistake we must surely be learning / Still my guitar gently weeps*  
George Harrison and & Ravi Shankar at the Concert for Bangladesh; August 1,  
1971

### **Introduction**

The word *revolution* came to acquire a new political usage from the late eighteenth century. Prior to that, it referred to the circular or elliptical movement of the celestial bodies, more specifically, to the completion of such a rotation. In English history, for example, it did not refer to the civil wars and political upheavals associated with Oliver Cromwell; but to the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the installation of a protestant monarch in the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688. It was only with the American and French revolutions of the late eighteenth century, that *revolution* began to signify an overhaul of a social and political system.

Even here, the leaders active in the beginning appealed for a return to an order of things that had been sullied by despotic monarchs – they used nostalgic language, they sought a restoration. However, the war of independence and the storming of the Bastille launched a flow of events that overthrew the earlier usages, along with the despotism that was the immediate target. *Revolution* began its new semantic journey, into the political vocabulary of modern protest and the aspirations of the oppressed. It retains its geometric usage, as in the number of revolutions per minute of mechanical rotors, but in the political realm, it evokes not a circle but a straight line, a pathway to a freedom and a better life.

In the nineteenth century the French Revolution became the archetypal model for an all-round transformation of the social and political order. It became the political embodiment of the Enlightenment ideals of the liberation of the human spirit and the sovereignty of reason. It proclaimed the freedom of the intellect from theological tutelage and the overthrow of the Divine Right of Kings as a principle of state legitimacy. The modernist project was best envisioned in Marquis de Condorcet's *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*, a veritable manifesto of Reason.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, in 1794, his exercise of the right to free speech in defence of political moderation was to cost him his life. Equally ironic is the habitual citation of 1789, a unique and singular event, as the basis for sweeping generalisations about the 'inevitable' stages of world history.

### **The Law of Progress**

The late eighteenth century was the period when the idea of history took its modern form. Its new essence was the idea that History was the story of Progress. Gradually the entire vocabulary covering human aspirations towards freedom, justice and social emancipation was overtaken by an organicist concept of history, akin to the evolution of a living organism. This tendency was strengthened with the advent of Darwin's theory a few decades later. One offshoot of biological evolutionism was Social-Darwinism. The British philosopher Herbert Spencer coined the term 'survival of the fittest' in the 1860's to refer to Darwin's concept of 'natural selection'.

A branch of Social-Darwinism was Eugenics, the 'science' of strengthening the hereditary qualities of a race, most notoriously advocated some decades later by the Nazis. For conservative European ideologues of the racialist anxiety that was current in the era of high imperialism, Darwin's ideas proved very attractive indeed. But the extrapolation of the 'dialectics of Nature' into human history also

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<sup>1</sup> The text of which is available here:

[http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1669&Itemid=27](http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1669&Itemid=27)

took place within the progressive thought of the late nineteenth century, and this was rooted in the tradition launched at the time of the first great revolutions.<sup>2</sup>

Organicist concepts became a means of demonstrating the law-governed nature of reality. History was now deemed to contain the seeds of progress regardless of the thoughts and motives of humans engrossed in their welter of activities. Kant described these activities as ‘melancholy haphazardness’. Hegel described the long sequence of bloody conflicts as a “panorama of sin and suffering.” But, he said “even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized - the question involuntarily arises - to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered.”<sup>3</sup> He went on: “The sole aim of philosophical inquiry is to eliminate the contingent...We must bring to history the belief and conviction that the realm of the will is not at the mercy of contingency. That world history is governed by an ultimate design, that it is a rational process - whose rationality is not that of a particular subject, but a divine and absolute reason. The time has now surely come for us to comprehend even so rich a product of creative reason as world history. The aim of human cognition is to understand that the intentions of eternal wisdom are accomplished not only in the natural world, but also in the realm of the [spirit] which is actively present in the world. *From this point of view our investigation can be seen as a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God.*” (emphasis added) <sup>4</sup>

Theodicy is a fascinating concept, and it is significant that Hegel used it to describe his investigations. It can be defined as the doctrinal vindication of (otherwise inexplicable) evil in terms of divine providence. In other words, it points to God’s plan to squeeze Good out of Evil. There are many kinds of

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<sup>2</sup> One example of the extrapolation of natural law into human history is Narendra Modi’s citation of Newton’s third law: *To every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction*, as a means of justifying state-enabled terror in Gujarat post the Godhra incident in 2002. Another is Rajiv Gandhi’s 1984 metaphor about the earth shaking when great trees are uprooted. The earthquake metaphor has also been used by pro-RSS commentators talking about 2002.

<sup>3</sup> G.W.F. Hegel; *The Philosophy of History*; Dover Publications, New York, 1956, p 21

<sup>4</sup> G.W.F. Hegel. *Introduction to the lectures on the philosophy of world history*, CUP, 1975. pp 28, 42

theodicy; and paradoxically, some are secular in orientation. It is evident that radicals of all kinds (including messianic nationalists) are attracted to this idea, even if they are unfamiliar with the term itself. In the case of secular theodiceans, God's role is taken by History, which justifies evil deeds performed by the cadre of whichever party is supposedly leading us to the pre-determined goal.

In their philosophical compulsion to make sense of the turmoil of centuries, both Kant and Hegel attempted to discern reason at work in the passage of time. Ultimately, Time brought about reasonable changes in human behaviour and institutions. History as the unfolding of the Spirit was seen to be the bearer of these already-present positive tendencies. Just as the seed contained the tree *in potentio*, so did the seed of historical time contain the tree of ultimate reconciliation. Thus Hegel: "nothing else will come out but what was already there." (This was another way of saying that there is nothing new under the sun). Thus did Hegel develop his grand philosophical system, the attempt at a complete speech, wherein reason gave an account of itself without recourse to an external ground.

However, whereas Hegel saw the present as the organic outcome ('ultimate design') of the past, Marx and the revolutionary tradition turned history into the arena for the *future* emancipation of the proletariat. In its revolutionary avatar, politics became conflated with History. As a result, the revolutionary tradition began to measure itself and its activities with the stages of historical development that were deemed to be built in to the history of all countries. No theory of politics was required, because all political questions were subsumed under the rubric of the Transition. Crucial issues such as the nature, form and legitimacy of political representation, the so-called sovereign Will of the People or Proletariat; the requirements of law and justice; the separation of powers; the phenomenological (rather than tactical) understanding of violence and its relation to politics; and the ideals of freedom and democracy and their implications for workers, were set aside in the face of the imminent Revolution, preparation for which took precedence over all else.

## **Revolutionary activity**

Revolutionary activities in India are closer to the original meaning of *revolution* than the comrades realise. Revolutionary parties ground themselves upon rebellious sentiments and sacrosanct doctrines. The most significant of these doctrines is that the proletariat has a historical goal, and that there is only one correct strategy that can lead it towards that goal. This strategy is accessible to the scientists of socialism, who are grouped together in the Communist Party. In the minds of its cadre, the party assumes the shape of some kind of incarnation of the working class. (I leave aside the question of the relationship between the early terrorist groups and the left-wing parties of the 1920s).

Given the fact that real life always tends to fall short of tall claims and utopian ideologies, sooner or later its cadre tends to become conformist or cynical. They raise questions of bureaucratism and dogmatism - most of the time this indicates a preference for a slightly different set of dogmas - and the party splits. A new vanguard is set up with the same broad organizational and doctrinal beliefs as the old one, and with some minor changes in the title of the party. Apart from doctrinal issues, the dominant narrative in such splits is that of betrayal. The old leadership is deemed to have betrayed the revolutionary path, and the new entity represents the apparent recuperation of genuine revolutionary forces for the benefit of the People. Thereafter the pattern is repeated in a new cycle.

This cyclical vacillation also happens with regard to the status of armed struggle in the activity of revolutionaries. In 1948-50 the CPI converted the Telengana movement into all all-out insurrection against the Nehru government, and launched what Mohit Sen referred to 'Naxalism without the Naxalites'. In the face of repeated setbacks, a CPI delegation went to Moscow in 1950, where they were told by Stalin to call off the armed struggle and participate in Indian democracy for whatever it was worth. Less than two decades later, the party split twice, first in 1964 (after the 1962 Sino-Indian war) and then again with Naxalbari, in 1967.

Charu Mazumdar and his followers denounced the CPI (Marxist) for betraying the Revolution, and also raised questions on dogma, lack of democracy etc.

A fresh attempt at organizing armed revolution began in 1969. After the first year there was a crisis, as Charu's line did not seem to be working even where it was faithfully carried out, as in Midnapur. The leadership sent a senior comrade to China (via an interesting route: Rome, Tirana, Dacca, Peking) and he returned with news of the Chinese Party's sharp criticisms of Charu's annihilation line. The CPC was also believed to have criticized the slogan *China's Chairman is our Chairman*.<sup>5</sup>

Around 1971, splits appeared once more on bureaucratism and points of dogma. The really big political and moral crisis was the Chinese defence of Pakistan's integrity at a time when Pakistan's Bengali population was being slaughtered by its Army.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly in late 1971, it appeared that Mao's chosen successor Lin Biao was a Soviet agent and had died trying to escape to the USSR. Despite all this, the habit persisted of treating the CPC as an oracular source of wisdom.

The Naxalites split into pro and anti-Lin factions, and Charu's obsession with annihilation came under attack.<sup>7</sup> Thereafter new vanguards were set up, and participation in mass democratic activity was begun, although within the ambit of a doctrinal affiliation to armed struggle. After a while some very revolutionary comrades denounced as traitors those taking part in peaceful agitations, and re-started the armed struggle. And so on. Now there are signs that yet again,

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<sup>5</sup> In the late 1960's young Naxalite comrades would proclaim their revolutionary ardour by adopting extreme postures over trivial things, such as insisting that Mao be referred to not as Comrade but as Chairman. The greater the degree of mindless adoration you professed for Mao Tsetung, the more revolutionary you were proven to be. This tendency persists today in the social networking media, where the high degree of outrage being vented indicates the presence of lots of revolutionary zeal. Maybe revolution is around the corner, as it was forty years ago. When the first phase was over, one unknown Calcuttan caught sight of the wall-slogan *Cheener Chairman Amader Chairman*, and wrote beneath it this riposte: *Aar Japaaner Raja Amader Raja*

<sup>6</sup> An account of the Bangladesh crisis and its impact upon the Naxalite cadre, may be read in my novel *Revolution Highway*, a fictional reconstruction of those times.

<sup>7</sup> I have discussed the hold of militarism upon the Indian revolutionary tradition in an article entitled [A Hard Rain Falling](#) (EPW, July 14, 2012)

comrades waging People's War are having second thoughts. Am I the only person to get the impression that revolutionaries are going around in circles?

### **Revolutionary habits**

Let us now consider some of the long-standing habits of revolutionary behaviour. At the philosophical level, I have already referred to the implications of reducing political questions to historical ones. At the level of political conduct, the most striking of these habits are as follows:

The tendency to invest politics with the aura of a permanent moral crusade

The search for heretics, the unmasking of enemies disguised as comrades  
(*aasteen ka saanp*)

The hatred of hypocrisy, the habit of being permanently on guard against hypocrites

The habit of sneering at everyone outside our circle (the use of wit as substitute for wisdom)

The insistence on doctrinal purification as a prerequisite for joint action

The belief that there is only one 'correct' course of action in any situation

The incursion into political speech of personal attacks (*ad hominem* remarks)

The imputation of base motives as an explanation for ideological disagreement

The citation of superior knowledge and sincere intentions as proof of our Goodness

The claim that our deeds cannot be judged by our peers, but only by future generations

The claim that if we are being cruel, it is only a means of being (Historically) kind

The conviction that collateral damage is only something our Enemies do, not us

The conviction that since we ourselves are very worthy, everyone else must be worthless

The idea that radical rhetoric establishes one's commitment to the public good; and that -

The more violent the proposed solution, the more admirable the character of its proponent

The tendency to enjoy victim status, whilst overlooking the plight of those whom we victimise

Let us examine these habits a little more closely. One broadly held assumption is that the analysis of the socio-economic situation suggests its own determinate activity – that is, the Correct Analysis points to the Correct Line. But the problem is that we have no independent means of verifying a correct analysis. In fact we can't even agree on the standards that might help us distinguish a correct analysis from an incorrect one. If antagonists in an argument cannot agree on what might (hypothetically) lead them towards agreement, then there is no likelihood of their ever agreeing on anything. Speech becomes equivalent to silence. Actually, they are doomed to disagreement, given the other problem (which is a logical precursor to the first one). This problem is that 'scientific' revolutionaries tend to insist that all truth is class truth.<sup>8</sup> This view is akin to Nietzsche's perspectival view of truth, because it contains an infinite regression: any depiction of the reality of truth can also be described as a class truth.

With such an attitude, no objective statement may be made about anything at all. Once the tension between subject and object is abolished and only the Subject remains, all theories become interpretations. (This is regardless of whether the Subject in question is the solitary bourgeois individual or the equally solitary Politburo of the Party, contemplating History on behalf of the working class). Furthermore, we are left with no means of discriminating between historical events and accounts of those events. We may believe anything we like about the Russian revolution, Stalinism, Nazism, the wars of the past century, the fate of the USSR, the emergence of Chinese capitalism etc., because "all truth is class truth", our Party is the true vanguard of the Class, and anyone who has a different historical account is a class enemy, QED. In fact, the very appearance of a different account is proof of the arrival of an enemy. For a long time now,

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<sup>8</sup> A closer look at this issue is contained in my essay [Permanent Spring](#), in Seminar # 607. It may be read here: [Permanent Spring: Indian Maoism and the Philosophy of Insurrection](#)



scientific revolutionaries have contributed to the destruction of the very idea of objectivity. George Orwell wrote about all this more than six decades ago – but then he was an enemy, was he not?

To return to the assumption that the Correct Analysis points to the Correct Line: is this an accurate description of revolutionary decision-making? Might it not be the case that this or that analysis is deployed as a means of justifying a line we have already chosen for some other reason altogether? Understanding these habits requires psychological insights. In her book *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt discusses Maximilien Robespierre's obsession with hypocrisy and virtue, and his conversion of politics into a limitless moral pursuit. She cites R.R. Palmer: "The hunt for hypocrites is boundless and can produce nothing but demoralization."

For Robespierre, patriotism was a thing of the heart, and that made it impossible to distinguish between true and false patriots. All actions became suspect because the virtuous leaders were always on the look-out for hypocritical motives. But motives are never so transparent, even to their owners. Making the purity of motives into a touchstone for participation in democratic politics is a recipe for disintegration. "Robespierre carried the conflicts of the soul... into politics, where they became murderous because they were insoluble."<sup>9</sup>

### **Outside the circle**

Where does all this leave us? We do need a rejuvenated politics, one that pays regard to the old social-democratic ideals of rendering the process of production amenable to popular control; a more democratic daily life, and a more secure life for women and children.<sup>10</sup> We also need to re-think the modernist stance of looking upon nature as a zone fit for technological conquest by humans. The range of problems facing humanity, not just in South Asia but the whole world, is

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<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*; Penguin Books, 1979; p 97

<sup>10</sup> These issues are addressed in a collective document issued in May 2011 calling for a rejuvenated left-wing politics: [End of the Left in India?](#)

staggering. All these things are well-known and need no recounting. At issue are the thoughts and practices with which those who see themselves as socialists, engage with these problems.

The continual recourse to *ad hominem* argument and the search for base motives has become a habit with leftists. Such destructive forms of speech were always in use by communalists. Whatever you said that sounded disagreeable to me was because you were a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, etc. All ideas were reduced to a sign of your identity, a symptom of some kind of mental disease that you inherited along with your DNA. This replacement of ideas by accusations is destroying the autonomy of thought. Communists were fond of saying “your ideas reflect your class character”. (Mostly it was petty-bourgeois leftists denouncing the class character of other petty-bourgeois leftists).

Nowadays we have regular references to someone’s caste as a reason for dismissing their ideas. *Ad hominem* methods have become the norm in public debate, which is another way of saying debate has come to an end. The reason is obvious - this is a double-edged sword. Every inconvenient view may now be dismissed on the ground that the person uttering it is a bad person by definition, and/or is incapable of thinking except in stereotypes. The very point of speaking is lost. We may as well remain silent.

The favourite norm of communication among revolutionaries is the polemical style. They are forever denouncing and sneering at others. Coupled with their congenital vanguardism, this style sabotages conversation before it can even begin. The sooner it is discarded, the better it will be for the comrades themselves, not to mention the general public. The assumption that doctrinal purity is a prerequisite for political action; implies that complete agreement is (a) possible (b) necessary.

Is this true? I think not. The comrades’ disregard for vast numbers of concerned persons who are neither Marxists nor materialists, is just a means of isolating

themselves. This isolation is not offset by their sense of superiority – fewer people are listening to their ideas anyway. They look increasingly like an archipelago of exotic religious cults, whose jargon and solutions are of no practical significance. Thus, the idea that a socialist movement needs to *overthrow* or *capture* something, is one among many fanciful assumptions. It needs to be set aside, along with the expectation of an apocalyptic confrontation. More respect and attention need to be paid to quotidian activity related to livelihood, human rights and justice. Socialists need to invent modes of organisational practice that allow for autonomy of thought as well as for concerted action *across a much broader range of popular and working-class movements* than has hitherto been attempted.

And finally, they need to give up the fascination with violence and martyrdom. Karl Marx's unfortunate choice of gynecological metaphors has had a sorry effect upon the leftist intellect. The tendency for violence to become a force in itself becomes more obvious with each passing day. The stamina of private armies and vigilante groups in India is a grievous problem, which I have discussed in the article mentioned in footnote 7 above. The lowest common denominator for democratic political activity is the respect for human life. It is true that the ruling class is brutal, but socialist politics must measure itself by a different standard. Otherwise, the system will not change - we will see only a change in its personnel.

Modern politics plays with the psychology of delayed gratification, a form of mental manipulation essential to the capitalist system. This is the market fundamentalists' version of prayer. One consequence of this psychic condition is "the peculiar restlessness and dispersion of our modern consciousness" noted by Hegel. Whereas sadness and happiness are part of the normal rhythm of life, the leaders of revolutionary enterprises (and that includes the capitalist revolution) constantly tell us to accept sadness today in order to be happy tomorrow.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stanley Rosen; *Metaphysics in Ordinary Language*; 1999. See the chapter named Sad Reason

Advocates of the Bright Future busy themselves in drawing and re-drawing instructions on how we may arrive there.<sup>12</sup> Nowadays these bubbles of stimulated euphoria are bursting at a faster pace than before. It would be better for us to define our political projects along more practical lines, learn to speak with moderation, and act to bring about reforms that we wish to see - in howsoever modest dimensions they can be achieved.

Towards the end of his famous essay *The Rebel*, Albert Camus remarked that “calculated revolution” prefers “an abstract concept of man to a man of flesh and blood.” Forgetting its own generous origins, it denies existence and puts resentment in the place of love. Real generosity towards the future said Camus, “lies in giving all to the present”. It is time to step outside the *kaalchakra* and begin afresh. Who knows? We could surprise ourselves, and something truly novel might yet transpire.

*Hamse mut poochcho kaise*

*Mandir tootaa sapno ka*

*Logon ki baat nahin hai..*

*Yeh kissa hai apno ka*

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<sup>12</sup> It is this kind of pipe-dream that resulted in the joke current in the last years of the USSR: Question: ‘Papa what is communism? Answer: It’s like the horizon son, an imaginary line that retreats as you approach it.’